

INTEGRATION OF PRAXEOLOGY AND PHENOMENOLOGY METHODS

regarding creating the blurred space under scope of heritage architecture intervention

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Methodology and Architecture Design

Architects sometimes have a thinking inertia regarding to research process. Research study could be very general and lack of focus, because of the limitation of time, cost or simply awareness. We might be still trapped in the mire of unconsciousness of what we want to know exactly, what we might have overlooked and what dilemma or challenges are ahead when choosing certain kinds of research approaches without knowing our purpose and the methods themselves.

As research is, in most cases, the process before further interpretation or intervention, research methods we choose could dictate directly the way we perceive the objective at the very beginning, and a chain reaction on later phases could happen, ultimately the methods thus predetermine the way research question was framed without our awareness to some extent. So, it is fundamental to think and design our own approaches based on the problems to be solved or information to be gathered initially. Stanford Anderson once said, “architects’ problem is not how to found his knowledge positively but how to make his knowledge grow”.¹ And the relationship between research and design is not linear, instead, they are reciprocity, and supplementary with each other, growing together. The design process need support from research to find a way out for further intervention; on the other hand, research process also gains research objective and suited research methods from design action. It’s not fair to say they are always equally important, but two of them together compose an integral architectural progress.

I was inspired and enlightened by the way of various means of methods were discussed during the lecture series. It helps me to shape my own methodology in heritage graduation studios. There is neither a right answer nor a singular approach to the problem of what architectural research should be,² and the different methods announced in six lectures serve as inspiration for our own finding in terms of architectural research. Additionally, I think the purpose of various topics is not only the introduction of methods, but also, or more significantly, the different ways of perception and thinking in dealing with varied architecture issues or even the same issue. Apart from lectures by speakers, the discussion session is a very good opportunity to communicate some conceptual or specific puzzles with lecturers, and the conversation is heuristic.

1.2 Introducing Praxeology and Phenomenology in Heritage Conservation Research

The studio of Adapting 20th Century Heritage concerns the problem of vacant young heritages in reclaimed Flevo polder in Netherlands. The building of our project, named the Beurs, is the very first office building constructed in Almere stad, which has been vacant for more than 10 years. Since the city as established from scratch, the Beurs was built within no urban context then, well it had strong ambition to be a social and traffic hub by including a bicycle lane when designed. However, the bicycle lane was abandoned with later changes in urban planning, leaving it a strange confusing sculpture today. The abandoned public places like the Beurs and its outdoor area are very common in Almere. On one hand, urban planning strategy determined very well different function zones inside the city with extremely hard edges, along which the in-between areas are unfrequented and left over. The Beurs is in one of these in-between areas. On the other hand, the disconnection with local living context from the moment it was built up makes these places highly overlooked by the authority as well as local inhabitants. Based on my personal interests of human behavior and urban public space in Almere, I chose the topic of revitalization of urban social life by blurred space in Almere in Heritage and Architecture graduation studio. And my research question of graduation thesis is how to assign real social hub spatial quality to the Beurs within its current new town context. This essay is going to reflect on the association of praxeology and phenomenology approaches under the discussion of creating blurred public space.

2 RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

2.1 Selected Research Methods

In heritage architecture intervention, the design is no longer only inspired by the future function, or by the artistic intuition of the designer, instead it is based on the cultural value, the social reality and the 'mentality of the place'.³ However, the construction of Almere and the Beurs is just the opposite situation. After the second world war, before Almere was planned, the most obvious change in the field of architectural design was that modern architecture became a large-scale mechanical product like the Beurs. Furthermore, when new towns were under construction, architects didn't have a specific context to face to, as the craftsmen did in the past. This hinders the architects from feeling a variety of life phenomena, making it impossible for them to directly grasp and experience the real living condition. The loss of experience in architects designing process directly leads to the fact that the environment in which people live is hard to arouse people's appreciation and feelings about daily beauty.

The urban planning of Almere is so dominated that functional zones only have monotonous programs and people stay their own home in most the leisure time, therefore the majority of urban public space is lifeless. The blurred space I proposed means a space which is not only for functional and practical purpose, but also as a trigger of unexpected encounter, occasion and events. A public program is here to attract people to come, but the things happen here would be occasional and accidental. In this way, allure and curiosity out of random events will be aroused, while the hard edge between function zones will be defused. As Claudia Konyalian mentioned in her study of Cyprus public space that a successful public space could make people touched with collective influence of sound, sunlight, surrounded scenes, events happening next you and so on, all these sensory happen to create a sense of belonging and make you even want to share your movement with a stranger.⁴ This is the phenomenon missing especially in Almere. To achieve this atmosphere, just as Bakkers suggested in her lecture of praxeology, architect should develop an eye for the actual users of building, instead of the imagined ones.⁵ Observing and experience personally citizens' daily routine and leisure activities help me to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between human and space in Almere. In this way, the epistemology framework of praxeology and phenomenology is the approach I chose to find an answer to revitalization of the Beurs and establish connection between it and its urban living environment.

2.2 Epistemic Framework of Selected Methodology

Praxeology is a study about human actions in different situations, and researchers are often observers as well. Praxeology contributes to a better comprehension of people's response to and a systematical prediction of a public space. The way how people used the space is not included in municipality's archive but sited in inhabitants' daily life and common memory. And they are significant resources to learn the social reality and the 'mentality of the place' before heritage intervention. Similarly, phenomenology is also based on the most basic and essential world of human daily life, but it concerns feeling spaces on our own as an experiencer. Under the scope of phenomenology, relationship between human and architecture is not restricted to visual connection, as Juhani Pallasmaa suggested in his book *An Architecture of the Seven Senses*, sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, movement and bodily awareness are collectively acting on shaping and feeling a space.⁶ Based on experience of these multi-layer sense, we perceive the space as a whole with our own interpretation.⁷ The synergy of both views of observer and experiencer helps architects obtain stronger connection with a heritage environment and local people.

3 RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

3.1 Historical-theoretical Context

The evolution of Praxeology is time-honored and rich. Alfred Espinas, a French philosopher and sociologist, first gave the term praxeology a modern meaning in 1890 in the field of economy, based on his precedent Louis Bourdeau's first defining it as a classification of sciences. Afterwards, the study gradually developed into several principle branches, but they share similar believes. The believe is that instead of reflexive behavior like accidental actions, human conduct goal-directed behavior, and it is the logic of action and deed.⁸ Ludwig von Mises later explained praxeology under the scope of economy that action and reason are homogeneous. The reason has the power to make clear through pure ratiocination the essential features of action is a consequence of the fact that action is an offshoot of reason.⁹ In this sense, human behavior is objective and universal. The notion that humans engage in intentioned behaviors suggested that they have preferences, in this way, conducting observation, prediction and reasoning of human action would be helpful in testing social practice in a vacant heritage area.

As for architectural phenomenology, it comes from phenomenology philosophy, which is funded by German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. In Husserl's description, phenomenology was defined as a concept break beyond the physical, psychological and empiricism constrain, and it evoke people's rethinking of our perception of essences sited in the things.¹⁰ Followed by generations of phenomenologists, the study developed into different fields with their own attitudes and methods. Phenomenology of existence and perception are two of the most frequently discussed.

The representative of the study of existence is Christian Norberg Schulz, who believes that the most concrete statement of the environment is the place, including the occurrence of behavior and events. A place is not an abstract location, but a whole consisting of materialized objects with the essence, form, texture and color of matter. Collection of these elements determines an environmental identity and essence. The main representatives of the study of perception are Steven Hall, Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor who have done a lot of architectural practices in this field. During the experience of these architectural works, the significance of various human perceptions has been clarified and strengthened. The overall consideration in the design scheme addresses perceptual elements, including vision, touch, hearing, smell and taste, as well as materialized elements, which are space, light, volume and so on. Phenomenology of perception is easier to guide into architectural design than phenomenology of existence.¹¹ Only through the dimension of the body can the external real environment be connected with the inner space experience, so all the space (building) shaping is

corresponding to the body or the experience of the body. It constitutes the sole driving force and essence of architectural design according to Merleau Ponty's description about archaeological phenomenology.¹² Although there are different branches in phenomenology, phenomenologists share the common principle. Architectural phenomenology advocates that any place is spiritual, and the architect's duty is to protect and continue this spirit.¹³

3.2 Reflection on Selected Approach

As Jan Gehl, a Danish architect who is dedicated to improve urban life coziness by reformulate urban public spaces in most of metropolis, argued that urban spaces are far too large to be enjoyable, and cities should be for pedestrians and cyclers which will not be delivered by architects and planners who only see the city from a god's view.¹⁴ In the case of a new town, a lack of human scale caring is very common as the situation Gehl depicted. With metropolis growing and satellite cities emerging, losing of human scale in new towns becomes a worldwide urban space issue. In Almere, large function islands, planned in an efficiency-oriented way, also arouse people's attention of the human scale reaction and urban coziness. My research is beyond the constrained idea that the context is basically about the location, orientation, accessibility and surrounded materialized elements. Instead, pattern of people's daily life, the way inhabitants react on existing built environment and social practice between the built forms are of even more importance, especially when it comes to an essentially understanding of a heritage context. Both praxeology and phenomenology deal with human-related issues, however with different emphasizes. Praxeology ensures architects an objective position, observing and reasoning human activities as a neutral researcher. While phenomenology enables architects get involved into the researched target and learning through experiencing. By combining methods of praxeology and phenomenology, both subjective and objective perception of the site and the city could be obtained, and spatial essence of existing building with its outdoor space is able to be captured.

4 POSITIONING

With my own interests about public space in Almere, I was inspired by several talks provided during the lecture series. Lecture about spatial narratives by Klaske Havik's offered various intriguing ways of literacy narratives about space and spatial narrative practices. The spatial and literacy experience follow stages of description, transcription and prescription. As an explorer and experienter, each has different interpretation of a common area. In this term, architects should not be only manipulators of geometric boxes or forms, but authors of experience of description, transcription and prescription. The role of architect is similar to Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino, and the occupants of the designed space are readers of the book, in which everyone can capture a piece of a city he/she desires. The blurred space is exactly the place Marco depicts for the emperor Kublai Khan.¹⁵ For urban dwellers, urban elements become meaningful and vital at the moment when it has certain relationship with themselves. Havik made it clear about the different position of authors and readers. From my point of view, before an architect composes a scenario as an author, he/she is supposed to be an outstanding reader of the context at first.

Another lecture about Spatial and Social Practices by Marieke Berkens encouraged me to think about the real needs of the real users of an architectural product. Architects, planners and municipalities seem to try to introduce dominated intervention on a site, vacant or not, in a violent way from time to time. A pre-estimated specific functions and way of using them is imposed abruptly, especially in cases of new towns. Individual interpretation and interaction with local space is constrained to a large extent this way. In the case of affordable housing in Casablanca in the lecture, government's priority is quantity while inhabitants desire for living quality in planning. Dwellers' voice need be heard at least anyway. The situation of this case is similar with Almere, although the tension is far less severe than Casablanca. Almere was a top-down planned city at first, nevertheless, to make it more sustainable and flexible, down-top strategy was applied latter on, involving citizens into decision making process.

On the base of its democratic atmosphere, a praxeology research is promising to be implemented for creating a tailor-make heritage intervention of the Beurs.

Similarly, Tom Avermaete once proposed in a lecture that new relationship between the public and architects could be established by bring the public into the construction and design process to relate the project more closely with people. The famous example is the ZUS in Rotterdam. By introducing public into the whole process, the public are not only reader but also author, and architects become coordinators instead of dominated director of whole design product. A more coordinate relation between architects and users is formed in such a way that user regain their right to react and make a difference on their own city. At the same time architects obtain first-hand information of praxeology research via direct contact with users who are also their colleagues.

The blurred space is trying to be formulated through human action research of local urban space, and space study via multi-layer sensory approach. It shouldn't be restricted to a fixed function and a rigid way of being used, but should be somewhere full of randomness and self-initiation, just as presented in Berkers' lecture, it is expected to be a stage for everyday practice, and attention should be brought back to the social ecology in new towns like Almere.¹⁶ An integrated study of praxeology and phenomenology enable architects a complete and useful grasp of relation between the heritage environment and its users. Above all, I will conduct the combined research methods throughout the research process of urban context of the Beurs. Together with the systematic research principle of heritage building, there will be a complete perception of both the Beurs and its urban setting.

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